

**- DRAFT 030915 -**  
**RESPONSE FROM CHURCH OF NORWAY**  
To the Faith and Order Document no. 214, Geneva, WCC 2013  
The Church – Towards a Common Vision

### **Introductory remarks**

The Church of Norway would like to extend our sincere thanks for the Faith and Order document no. 214, “The Church – Towards a Common Vision” (hereafter “The Church”), and the invitation to give our response to the document. We understand the document to be a major convergence text in the ecclesiological dialogue process following the Faith and Order document 111, Geneva, WCC, 1982 on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry.

We understand that our task is to offer a response to the questions formulated in the introduction to the document, however, we would also like to offer some comments to some of the different chapters of the document, as well as general comments. Furthermore, we find it relevant to present the process in which the document has been treated within the Church of Norway.

### **The Process in Church of Norway**

The Christian Council of Norway in collaboration with the Church of Norway Council on Ecumenical and International relations had the text translated and published in Norwegian<sup>1</sup>. At this point, the Christian Council of Norway has not published a response to “The Church”.

Upon reception of the document, the Council on Ecumenical and International Relations in Church of Norway asked its Theological commission to give its comments to the document. As the Theological Commission regards the document as a major text on the understanding of the church, and seeing that Church of Norway itself is undergoing major changes in its relations to the state of Norway, the Commission recommended sending the document on an internal consultation within Norway. Thus, the document has been widely distributed, and all diocesan councils; faculties of theology and church-related educational institutions were invited to give their response to the document. In addition to the questions posed by Faith and Order, a question was asked on the relevance of the document to Church of Norway’s work on a new church order.

Eight responses were received, four coming from educational institutions and four from diocesan councils. In addition to the comments of the Theological Commission these responses have formed the basic draft of this draft response from Church of Norway.

*(Mer om prosess når denne foreligger)*

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.norgeskristnerad.no/doc//Skriftserie/Nr%2018%20-%20Kirken%20.pdf>

## To the questions:

### 1. To what extent does this text reflect the ecclesiological understanding of your church?

We find that the document gives us good opportunities to maintain an Evangelical Lutheran understanding of the church in our own context, as the document points out that the church is a creation of the Gospel (*creatura evangelii*). Based on this we understand it as necessary for the church to have an ordered ministry for the proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. This can be done in different ways, but we support the criterion presented in "The Church", that the form of the ministry must be appropriate to the Gospel. We also appreciate that the document highlights that all baptised are part of a holy priesthood, and are therefore equal in the eyes of God, even if they are called by God to offer different types of service. However, the document could perhaps have been clearer on the fact that the church is, and has always been imperfect, and that this imperfection belongs to the very being of a church created by the Gospel.

Even if the text does not provide a traditional presentation of a Lutheran understanding of the church, it is still compatible with important views in Lutheran ecclesiology. We could have wished for further treatment of the role of Baptism in the understanding of the church, although we are aware that this has been treated more thoroughly in other documents. Overall we find that the text expresses convergence with a Lutheran understanding of the church.

Among the many themes that could be pointed out with regards to this convergence, is the understanding of the local worshipping community as a basic unity for the church, which corresponds well to a Lutheran understanding of church, as expressed in CA VII. In our opinion, the understanding of the universal church as a "fellowship of local churches" (Par.31) is a good starting point for understanding the ecclesiological status of churches and ecumenical communities. The way *koinonia* and *communion* are used in the document give helpful insights for understanding the very essence of being church. The implicit inclusion of diversity in understanding communion is helpful also within the Church of Norway, allowing for diversity in local expressions of being church.

The text seems to be part of a general trend within ecclesiological discussions recent years. While confessional traditions have been the starting point in earlier discussions, this text establishes a larger, ecumenical perspective. An important premise for this development is a renewed consciousness about eschatology, where the church is understood, not as the realisation of the Reign of God, but as a sign and foretaste of the Reign. To this new orientation belongs a new reading of the scriptural passages on the church, which contributes to exceeding former confessional separations and to open up to convergence and differentiated consensus on the understanding of the church.

The missional understanding of the church, as expressed in paragraph 14, is of particular interest to Church of Norway. Understanding mission as part of the essence of being church has been a major theme within the church recent years. The document does not merely point to a missional ecclesiology, but gives content to such an understanding of the church throughout the whole document.

## 2. To what extent does this text offer a basis for growth in unity among the churches?

Church unity is a central theme in the New Testament, in the ecumenical movement, and also in our church. Visible unity is a goal, but also a challenge, globally and locally. We are therefore grateful that Faith and Order presents a convergence text focussing on this theme, and we regard “The Church” as a useful tool for the on-going theological and ecclesial work to promote visible church unity. The most important contribution of the document is to remind us that the subject of the church is the Trinitarian God, and that the fellowship of the church – *koinonia* – is a gift. Understanding the church as a missional and diaconal community provides an opportunity for churches to continue to grow together, and at the same time keep their own distinctiveness.

The relation between what the church *is* and what the church *does* has often been treated separately. It is therefore satisfying to register that these two dimensions of the understanding of the church to a larger extent seems to be integrated, e.g. as expressed in the document: “...service (*diakonia*) belongs to the very being of the Church” (Par 58).

We do, however, find reason to point out that some work remains. It is important to note that divisions between churches are not all confessional divisions, but are divisions based on other issues, such as gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other. Often this is expressed with good intentions, such as the church being “up against” or “facing” injustice, exclusion, crises, illnesses and the like. But it can also be read as if they are ethical challenges from outside. In reality these challenges are to be found in the middle of the church community, and are therefore themselves part of this reality. Thus, this challenge to church unity comes from within the church.

“The Church” presents an understanding of what it is to be church, which is more capacious than many confessional understandings are. This provides each church with useful resources for their own reflections on what it means to be church, a process that can lead to an increased understanding of other churches’ ecclesiology, again leading the churches closer to a common understanding of what the overall vision, identity and mission of the church is. Whether the text actually contributes to growth in unity will depend on the reception process of the churches. It is to be hoped that “The Church” will be received in a similar way to the Faith and Order document “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry”, where the responses provided useful tools for further work on visible unity.

On another positive note, we would like to highlight the pilgrimage motive, which runs through the document as a whole, particularly in Chapter III. The church is necessarily a moving community, subject to changes. According to this understanding it anticipates the Reign of God, although not being the full realisation of the Reign. The pilgrimage motive could also have been adapted to Chapter IV, with regards to the moral challenge of the Gospel. It is when facing difficult ethical questions that it is important to point out that some of the moral challenges are relatively new to our time, whether they are about global injustice, care for creation or principles for interpretation of how personal and collective morale responds to the Gospel of Christ (Par. 63 – 64). In this context it is important to hold on to a double commitment; to consider the changing premises, as well as the commitment on the apostolic faith of the church.

In our view, the text shows that there is a potential for greater unity among the churches when it comes to most ecclesiological questions. At the same time, it also becomes clear from the text that the greatest difficulty today is the question around ministries in the church, including questions around ordained ministries. It seems that for many churches the structure of ministries is a basic requirement for greater unity. Here, the document continues the BEM document's proposal of a three-fold ministry as a future model for the churches. On our part, we are not certain that this is the way to go. As long as the churches that actually have a form of three-fold ministry understand the different ministries in different ways, and as long as there are very many churches that don't operate with a three-fold ministry, we believe it is important not to lock the dialogue on ministries to the one question of a three-fold model (Par. 45 – 47). Even if one could obtain a certain convergence among the historic churches, this could exclude a number of younger churches where such an understanding of ministry is unfamiliar. From a Lutheran point of view it is also unfamiliar to put such weight on authority and obedience when it comes to the theology of the ministry (Par 48 – 51).

The development of a three-fold ministry does not correspond to recent developments in Church of Norway, where we currently operate with four (five with bishops) ordained ministries. This has so far been understood as the most useful way of organising the ordained ministries in our context. On this background we find that the document does not sufficiently discuss whether a certain pattern for ministries actually is necessary for the unity of the church. From a Lutheran standpoint it is important to insist on certain functions that the ministries of the church need to take care of, but the form of the ministries can vary. This corresponds to the document's observation: "There is no single pattern of ministry in the New testament...At times the Spirit has guided the Church to adapt its ministries to contextual needs" (Par. 46). In our view this should question the assumption that agreement around a certain model of ministry should be necessary for church unity.

A particular challenge in the discussion on ministry is the question of ordination of women. The issue is briefly mentioned in paragraph 45, but we miss a more thorough treatment of it. This issue is often not dealt with in ecumenical documents, although the question is so important to many churches. Discussions around women in ordained ministry, access for women to church leadership, and questions around gender equality are generally not found in the document. The calling to "defend human life and dignity" (Par. 64) must include defending the dignity of women, and thereby deal with questions of gender equality.

We also find it problematic that the document treats ordained ministries without thematising that all Christians are called to serve in the church in different ways, and that Spirit equips them to do so. In this sense the document takes a step back compared to BEM, which bases its discussion of ordained ministries in a theology of the calling of all believers to service (BEM, Ministry, Par. 5). Further work on lay ministry, as well as lay participation in church leadership, would be welcomed.

### **3. What adaptations or renewal in the life of your church does this statement challenge your church to work for?**

In a time where Church of Norway is facing great changes connected to different reforms and the on-going work with a new church order, "The Church" represent a potential resource in many ways. First of all, the text challenges the Church of Norway to ecclesiological reflections around the many reforms, and around a new church order. "The Church" presents a vision for the church, which could help give direction to Church of Norway's work in these areas. Secondly, the text challenges Church of Norway to think holistically around these processes of change. This vision underlines that the different sides of the church's identity and mission are interdependent. For example, "The Church's mission in the world is to proclaim to all people, in word and deed, the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ" (Par. 59). This can be understood as an incitement to let a missional approach influence everything the church does, by holding the proclamation of the Gospel and the service to the world (diakonia) together. This inspires the Church of Norway to deepen its understanding of the church's participation in God's mission.

It is, however, also at this point where the unity of what the church is and does should be expressed more clearly. When the document says: "...Christian communities cannot stand idly by in the face of natural disasters which affect their fellow human beings or threats to health such as the HIV and AIDS pandemic" (Par 64), or that the church must be in solidarity with the poor, it misses the fact that the church itself is victim to natural disasters and AIDS, and that the majority of Christians in the world live in poverty. As it is nicely put: "...as an historical reality, the Church is made up of human beings who are subject to the conditions of the world" (Par. 34). These are conditions that mean a lot more than the variety of beliefs and practices.

The text inspires Church of Norway to take up challenges on a number of areas, such as increased work on climate justice, peace and recognition of the distinctiveness of other confessional traditions. A particular challenge the document reminds us of, is our relationship to other religions and faiths. The text suggests a positive and inviting approach to other religions and people who are not members of the church, which is much appreciated (Pars. 25, 60). Perhaps an even clearer definition of respect and dialogue could have been applied. When Abraham is referred to (Pars 17, 18), Abraham could be understood primarily as the ancestor of the Christian church, while Abraham is in fact an important symbol of fellowship, e.g. in the dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims. In relation to dialogue in a multi-religious context, ethical guidelines for mission and evangelising could also have been explicitly mentioned. Otherwise, it is a strength that the document includes individual, personal and collective views on the responsibility for social justice (Par. 64).

The pilgrimage perspective of the document challenges us to reflect upon the church as something preliminary, as being on the way towards a goal. For an established church it is close at hand to think in static terms. "The Church" helps us to think of the church, and of us, as always being on the way, towards something different and greater. This is important knowledge for the individual, as well as for the institution. Reflections on the church as *koinonia* and communion also moves Church of Norway into a greater understanding of the church as a living community with diversity.

Finally, in the middle of Church of Norway's work on a new church order, the faith and Order text leaves us with a particular challenge when it comes to the understanding of

*koinonia* and *communion*. The text gives warnings against understanding a particular cultural expression of the Gospel as the only authentic one. This is a clear challenge for Church of Norway as a historical majority church in its own context, both when it comes to the church's preaching and service in a society undergoing major changes, and when it comes to the church's structures.

**4. How far is your church able to form closer relationships in life and mission with those churches that can acknowledge in a positive way the account of the Church described in this statement?**

Church of Norway finds itself involved in, and committed to, a number of ecumenical relationships on different levels. In general, there should not be a problem with forming closer relationships with churches that can acknowledge this document's understanding of the church. At the same time is the description of the church as it is provided in the text too broad to provide a satisfying basis for full church communion, e.g. when it comes to Eucharistic communion.

Also the understanding of ministry represents a challenge. It would be a greater hindrance if some churches see a certain model of ministry as a requirement for unity. Church of Norway can accept other churches' models for ministry, but it would not be possible to accept one model of ministry as a requirement. This would be particularly difficult if it meant to submit to the formal authority and jurisdiction of one universal ministry as a sign of unity. Paradoxically there have been ministries for unity who in themselves have become hindrances for unity. It is, however, possible to accept the authority of certain ministries as long as this does not require universal jurisdiction over the churches (cf. Par 56).

**5. What aspects of the life of the Church could call for further discussion and what advice could your church offer for the on-going work by Faith and Order in the area of ecclesiology?**

An obvious issue for Church of Norway to discuss further is leadership and authority within the church. This is an issue not only connected to the question of church ministry, but also to decision-making processes, participation and democracy in the church at local, regional and global levels. The Faith and Order document provides ample reflection on ministry and authority connected to ministries within the church. It is, however, little said on questions of democracy and participation, which for Church of Norway is a major question in a time when the church's relations to the state is changing, and a new church order is to be found.

A challenge with ecumenical documents is that they can become too general, and thereby obtain support without necessarily solving many problems. A reason why the BEM document became significant was that it discussed concrete questions around Baptism and Eucharist quite in-depth. The work on baptismal theology has been taken further, e.g. in the Faith and Order document "One Baptism". One could foresee similar processes when it comes to e.g. Eucharistic theology, the ministry of the church, and

questions of authority and competence within the church. These issues, however, would require a broader starting point for the discussion.

There is a reason to continue to ask what or who is the implicit subject of ecumenical documents, and what worldview they represent and create. As pointed out earlier, we would recommend further work on the interconnectedness of what the church *is* and what it *does*. We also believe that it would be helpful to focus more on divisions between churches that are not confessional divisions. One area where division between churches – or division within churches – can be found, is connected to questions of moral. The recent study document by Faith and Order, “Moral Discernment in the Churches” may be of help in this regard. It is important that the churches continue to provide safe spaces for discussions on sensitive ethical and moral issues.

Seeing the fact that discrimination based on gender still is a great challenge within and outside of churches, and on all levels, we regret that the document ends with a particularly gendered example of the relationship between God and the church. As churches need to deal with the unsolved challenge of gender-based discrimination, we would have appreciated a more inclusive use of language at this point (Par. 69).

### **General Comments**

Chapter 4 gives concrete and useful input to an understanding of what it means to be church in the world. Among the feedback papers received from faculties, the question is raised whether the prophetic voice of the Church, as described in Chapter 4 could have been even further strengthened. “The Church needs to help those without power in society to be heard...” (Par. 64), is an important statement. The question is whether this should have been strengthened by stating that it is part of the very essence of being church to be the voice for the voiceless. Thereby, a church fighting for justice could have been included in the previous chapters and seen as part of the essence of being church.

As the chapters now read, it may seem like the church is foremost about liturgy, sacraments, ministry and church order. Service to the world could be understood merely as an addition. However, the New Testament proclaiming freedom for the oppressed, food for the hungry, is connected to the message of forgiveness from sin. Salvation is a totality, understood both physically and spiritually, an understanding that seems to be reflected in the early church as a community of sharing (cf. Acts 2:44f, 4:32). This understanding of being church, *koinonia*, must be part of our ecclesiological reflections.

The document raises questions about whether the church has part in sin (Pars. 35, 65), a point that requires further reflection. The injustices that the church, either as an institution or through individuals, has enforced upon people throughout history, and still does today, must be dealt with. Too many people have experienced the church as oppressive. This duality of the church must therefore not be trivialised.

### **Concluding remarks**

As has been described in the introduction to the document, “The Church” was distributed widely within Church of Norway. A number of different points were raised in

this internal process, which were then collected and assembled into a joint draft response. Some of the points raised have been similar to the opinion of other institutions or dioceses; others have been more particular in their view. Then there have been issues raised about which there seems not to be an agreement. Most of these inputs have been included in the document, either as concrete answers to the questions of the Faith and Order document, as general remarks to the document, or as suggestions for further work to the Faith and Order Commission.

We would like to reiterate that among all the responses in the internal process in Norway, the document has received much positive feedback. A special strength of the text is that the commission to every chapter and subchapter brings in comments and questions. This makes the reading of the document dynamic and a theological conversation can unfold and make the content available to the reader. As such, the document therefore has a potential to contribute to the ecclesiological reflections of our church at local, regional and national levels.

In the very specific historical situation Church of Norway finds itself in the middle of, with an on-going process of separation between church and state, in an increasingly pluralistic society, "The Church" comes at a crucial time. A major value of the document is the description of diversity as part of the nature of the church. It is important to hold on to this diversity as a value in itself. Church unity takes place with and through diversity, thus there must be space for differences among the churches. Therefore, each church does not primarily have to aim to adapt to certain ecumenically agreed models. As each church is local, formed by the local congregation around the Word and the sacraments, the local characteristics are important. With this as a starting point, the unity of the church will carry diversity with it. From this perspective, "The Church" serves as an important source of inspiration for Church of Norway's own reflections on how it understands itself as church, both locally, and as part of the one church.

With our deep respect for all the reflections, discussions and work that have been part of the process forming "The Church – Towards a Common Vision", we here by wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the Faith and Order Commission on behalf of the Church of Norway.

Yours sincerely,

*Signatures.*